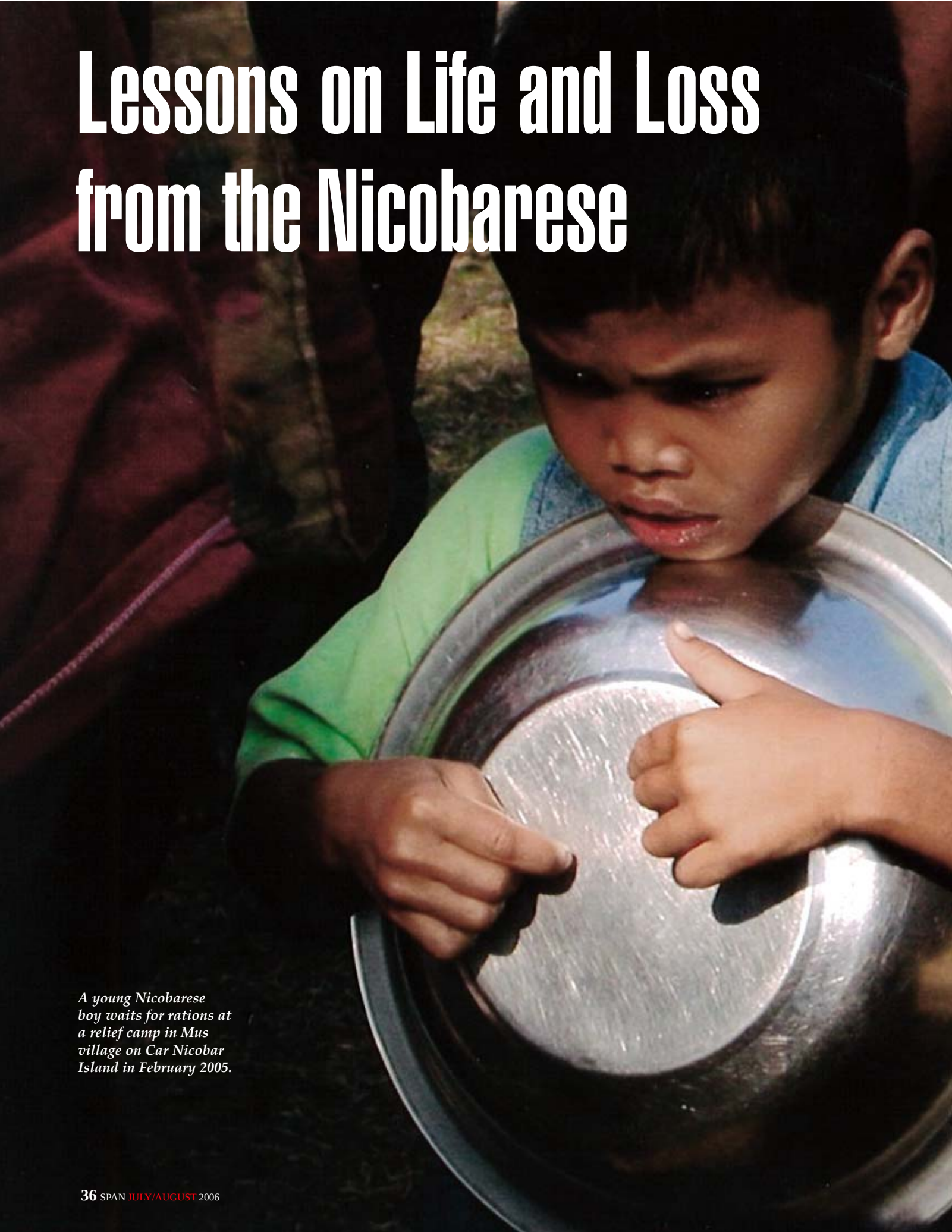
Lessons on Life and Loss from the Nicobarese



A young Nicobarese boy waits for rations at a relief camp in Mus village on Car Nicobar Island in February 2005.

Text and photographs by NEELESH MISRA

Life's biggest lessons sometimes come at the most unexpected moments, don't they? One of them looked me in the face from a sheet of paper as I stood in a makeshift relief camp on Car Nicobar Island in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago, less than two months after the December 2004 tsunami.

As officials asked survivors to list their losses, thousands of mainlanders who had come and settled there jotted down details of homes and motorcycles, cash and jewelry. But a man of the Nicobarese tribe from the small island of Camorta, bereft of many of these things as well, just wrote a few words to list his loss: "Three pigs. One dog." He didn't care for anything apart from his beloved pets.

From a man who would probably have witnessed the most crushing scenes of death like everyone else in his village and island, it was an eloquent statement on what matters in life, a spectacular way of dealing with loss.

Top: In Malacca, a coastal village on Car Nicobar Island, everything was destroyed except a statue of Mohandas K. Gandhi.

Above: An elderly couple who lost their home and belongings rests on a cot outside a small hospital-turned-relief camp in Mus village in the compound of the John Richardson Church on Car Nicobar Island in February 2005.

I came back wiser, a bit calmer, temporarily not worrying about my next raise or my next book, until chaotic New Delhi engulfed me again in its sharp-edged ways—and then I waited for another opportunity to go back to the Andamans to steal another small chunk of peace of mind.

Peace of mind. On that day in 2005, I thought that this rare commodity was all that the Nicobarese had, and used, to face the life-changing disaster that nature had brought to them.

Thousands had died across the network of 572 islands scattered across 8,290 square kilometers, otherwise lined with stunning beaches, clear blue waters and thick forests. Vast stretches of coral reefs and trees had been wiped out, more than 157,000 cattle and 38,400 pigs—the centerpiece of Nicobarese culture and economy—were killed. About 11,000 hectares of rice fields and coconut plantations—one-fifth of the total plantation area—were destroyed. About 10,000 houses, 85 schools, 34 medical centers, 20 power houses and 24 jetties were smashed. Islands were split and tilted.

There were other losses, though, that had a much more far-reaching impact. The 40,000 Nicobarese—former animists who have mostly converted to Christianity—still revere nature, winds, the sea and pass their customs down generations through riddles, fables and folklore. Each Nicobari who died in the tsunami was, anthropologist S. Bari told me, "a walking book that was no more." Most importantly, the Nicobarese, who have for centuries lived along the coast, had to give up living by their beloved sea, and build new villages inland.

And yet, as they have done for centuries, the Nicobarese prepared a stoic response to nature's fury. I spent months in the Andamans, going for several weeks to cover the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and then returning several times to document the rehabilitation. In the rest of India and other Asian countries, the tsunami had been a devastating tragedy, a tale of death and destruction and despair. But among the Nicobarese people, it was a saga of courage and hope, of community bonding, common efforts to deal with insurmountable calamities, and using traditional wisdom and skills to make their homes and villages better prepared for the future. It was a lesson the simple Nicobarese were holding out to a world increasingly imperiled by natural disasters.

The difference was stark in the relief camps in Port Blair, the archipelago's capital. There was despair and gloom in the mainlanders' camps, a wave of panic and desperation to flee the islands. But the Nicobarese camps seemed festive: they held prayer meetings in the evenings and sang hymns; they talked to each other to give strength, and their elders conceived designs for new homes that could withstand another onslaught from the waves.

When an aid group on Car Nicobar Island approached the Nicobarese elders to offer funds for an orphanage, a surprise was

Partners in Aid

Partnerships have been established between Indian towns struck by the tsunami and American cities that have recently recovered from natural disasters. The International City/County Managers Association is implementing a $1.98 million agreement to strengthen governance in Cuddalore and Nagapattinam in Tamil Nadu by establishing city-to-city partnerships with Palm Bay and Port Orange in Florida, which have recently recovered from hurricanes.

In addition, the U.S. Agency for International Development has been helping people affected by the tsunami in coastal areas of South India since December 2004, giving $4.28 million in immediate relief and another $13.68 million to fund on-the-ground groups that have built waste management, sanitation and safe drinking water systems, erected temporary shelters and day care centers and provided counseling, job training and entrepreneurial advice.

Also, cash-for-work programs have provided desperately needed income to thousands of families so that they can meet their daily needs and begin transitioning back to a normal life.

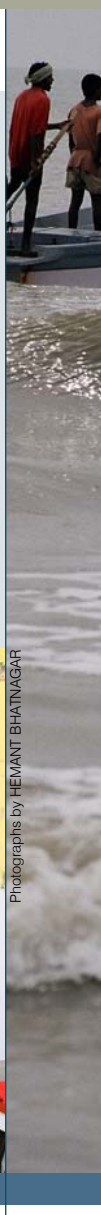
In the 18 months since the tsunami, USAID and its partners have helped provide temporary shelters for 4,294 families; safe drinking water and sanitation services for 115,600 families; trained 150 self-help groups in business management skills and formed 12,249 disaster management committees.

The $13.68 million in USAID grants includes:

- $673,375 to CARE to build water and sanitation projects, including community toilets.
- $200,000 for the U.N. Development Program for psychosocial counseling.
- $5 million for the U.N. Development Program to make disaster risk management methods part of normal civic life and government practice in 20 districts of Tamil Nadu.
- $511,500 for ACTED, an international organization, to promote self-help groups' livelihood revitalization projects.
- $4,878,600 for Catholic Relief Services (CRS) to undertake water, sanitation, health, shelter projects; to support women and youth and reduce trafficking.
- $2,401,560 for Project Concern International to execute water, sanitation, shelter, child care and education, health, livelihood revitalization and anti-trafficking projects in other tsunami-affected areas.
- $707,200 to support Exnora International in implementing a solid waste management and community organizations development project.

—A.V.N

A tailoring center for women run by the Pondicherry Multipurpose Social Service Society's livelihood program with support from USAID and CRS at Devanampattinam in the Cuddalore district of Tamil Nadu.



Photographs by HEMANT BHATNAGAR

in store. There are no words for "orphans" or "widows" in the Nicobarese language; the relief workers were told that the community would take care of everyone.

In the autumn of 2005, Vivek Porwal, an engineer-turned bureaucrat who volunteered to serve in the Nicobar Islands after the tsunami, conducted a survey of 26,000 Nicobarese and non-tribals, the largest study to observe post-traumatic stress disorder in the tsunami-hit zone. Porwal found more proof of what I had seen in the camps: the Nicobarese had sprung back swiftly from the disaster. There were, unlike among the mainlanders, no signs of acute psychological distress. Porwal told me at the time: "The non-tribals have shown signs of more stress, maybe because of their materialistic attitude or lack of the very strong social support that the tribals have, and their religious beliefs."

Oftentimes in the clutter of New Delhi's traffic, at noisy dinners, or in moments of brain-deadness when small problems seem insurmountable, my mind wanders to some of the faces I brought back with me from the Andamans: Tsunami Roy, the baby born in the forest hours after the tsunami who doctors said was certain to die with his mother due to birth complications; Michael Mangal, the man who was left alone for 25 days on his island where everyone died and he had to survive on rainwater and coconuts; Koshi Mackenroe John, the teenage boy who tried to save his submerged island of death by writing passionate letters for help that he wasn't sure would reach anyone; Jeremiah, who scoured the waves for the toe of his drowning eight-month-old son, Michael, and hauled him up to life.

The doughty Samir Acharya, a leading activist in the Andamans who taught me a lot about the Nicobarese, told me of some youths from the tribe who had once lived next door to him. One day they had nothing to eat. Instead of despairing, they took their empty canisters of wheat flour, started beating them and made a funny extempore song about hunger.

I don't have that *Sufi*-like spirit, the strength of resolve and the dispassionate calm of a mendicant who wanders the world and yet seeks to own none of it. I don't know how to feel the bliss of being able to abandon all that seems so central to our lives, and the power to unshackle myself from my ball-and-chain of desire and greed.

But I am working on it. Perhaps I need to go back to the Andamans. □

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